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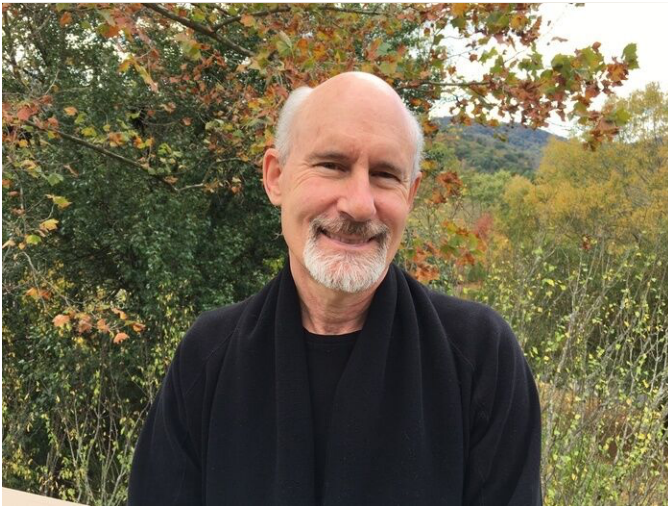


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Friendly Freethinker: Language Matters in Matters of Faith

By Chris Highland

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You may have heard statements like these: “Religious people are. . .”, “Atheists are. . .”, “Christians always. . .”, or, “Secular people always. . .” These may be followed by generalizations presented as facts, such as: “Muslims oppress women.” “Catholics obey the Pope in everything.” “Believers blindly follow the Bible.” Some people who make these claims seem to overlook one

glaring question: “How do you know that?” In a recent conversation with a Humanist group, one member felt I was implying that all Evangelicals are Christian Nationalists. I wouldn’t say such a thing, because I know that isn’t accurate. Many Evangelicals do believe America is, or should be, a Christian Nation, but, as a former Evangelical, I know that not every believer subscribes to the extreme ideology espoused in the Christian Nationalist movement. Generalizations are generally unfair.

Language matters. The words we use can express truths gleaned from long reflection, often requiring extensive experience. Knowledge is not only apriori (prior to experience) but aposteriori (after experience). If we want our language to be knowledgeable, and show serious thought, it has to be grounded in real world living, interacting, reflecting. As one of my Philosophy professors reminded students, we often have to settle for “tentative conclusions” about ideas. That may not “settle” very well with some, but it’s a good guiding principle to keep in mind when addressing religious concerns.

It may be wise to make it a practice to say something like: “In my experience, I’ve noticed that many. . .” This shows a

recognition there aren't enough factual elements to use words like "every" or "all." And it acknowledges "my" experience, which is always tempered by limitations. There can only be "tentative conclusions." We might state our views: "Some religious people ...", "Some Christians ...", or "Often times I think it's true that ..." or "Frequently, it seems to be the case that. . ." This serves to balance the oft-heard and oft-absurd: "The Bible says those people are ..." To quote is not to think.

Perhaps the most honest initial statement would be: "People I know who are [] seem to think or believe. . ." Additional intellectual honesty might be expressed: "I don't know for sure, since I haven't met any [], or only had limited contact with [], or asked any [] about this issue, but I think. . ." I respect religious and non-religious people who speak in this way, and I try to catch myself when tempted to generalize.

A conscious, careful use of language exhibits wisdom based on real knowledge that arises from actual experience in the real world. Some outspoken atheists present their personal, narrow description of religious people as irrational, delusional and frankly quite stupid. Some sneer:

“Religion poisons everything” or “God is not great” or “the God delusion,” taking potshots and cheapshots that serve no constructive purpose but to give “ammunition” for the “war” against religious faith of any kind (note: while leaving ministry and faith, I read these “new atheists” and often found them helpful in my process of emergence. Now I think some “new atheists” seem rather old, with regressive, myopic thinking). The often angry mockery associated with the “godless gospel” seems counter-productive to a positive secular messaging (freethinking humanism seems a good balance to aggressive, agitated atheism).

Some “atheist evangelists” have a tendency to slip into a kind of sloppy stereotyping, explicitly or implicitly making wild claims: “All religious people. . .” “Every person of faith. . .”, leaving no room for discussion. In my view, the bigger problem is lack of honest interaction with those who hold supernatural beliefs (this goes both ways of course). There is little potential for serious conversation or relationship. Some militant atheists are admired for their debating skills. Debating the opposition, like “apologetics” in Christian circles, seeks to publicly denigrate or humiliate other people and viewpoints. There is certainly a place for

civil debate, but presuppositions of superiority accomplish nothing constructive. Can there be room for personal or collegial connections when the whole point is to take sides and defend your (correct, orthodox) side? So, you “win” a debate. What’s next? The next debate?

Beyond the debate stage, beyond the defense of Our Side over Your Side, beyond “winning the war” against “Them,” we have to find better, smarter ways of speaking to and about each other. I think one key is to keep an eye on our use of “lump sums”—words that perpetuate prejudging which can, when unchecked, foster destructive demonizing of “the other.” To make progress toward a healthier, expansive experience, without asserting perspectives that s conclusions (stereotypes), ea to make a conscious decision your mouth,” as my mother used to say.

This doesn’t apply solely to swear words, but all terms that may carry, consciously or unconsciously, the baggage of bigotry.

“Some” is a good four-letter word that ought to be on some tongues more often.

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